

VZCZCXYZ0050
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDM #2213/01 1311400
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 111400Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8930

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 002213

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/11/2016
TAGS: [AMGT](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: DAMASCUS COMMUNITY SCHOOL FACES CRITICAL SITUATION

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4b/d

¶1. (U) Summary. Our ongoing discussion with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding residency permits for overseas-hire teachers at the Damascus Community School (DCS) took an ominous turn for the worse today, with receipt of a diplomatic note asserting that DCS must be licensed before the issue of normalizing the status of its faculty can be addressed. This is a demand with which we cannot comply and still expect to have an independent, English-language school in Damascus able to meet our children's educational needs, since licensing in the Syrian context means relinquishing control of the school's program, academic and otherwise, to the Ministry of Education. We have apprised other foreign missions of this escalation on the part of the SARG, and will continue to pursue resolution via the three communities the school serves: diplomats, foreign businesses, and influential Syrian families. End Summary.

¶2. (U) For the past several weeks, Post has been trying to persuade the Syrian government via contact at the MFA to issue residency visas for overseas-hire faculty. (Note: this situation affects nearly three dozen teachers whose visas have already expired or will on June 1.) This situation has grown increasingly critical as we approach the end of the school year, and teachers prepare to leave Syria for the summer, uncertain as to whether they will be able to re-enter Syria when classes resume in August. Clearly, it will be very difficult for the school to function in the absence of the majority of its overseas hire faculty, and the effect of such an event on families at this mission and all others who depend on DCS will be extremely negative.

¶3. (U) We recently have expanded our direct efforts with the MFA to include the following:

- On May 4, The Charge sent a letter to the chiefs of diplomatic missions (19 in all) that have children enrolled in DCS informing them of the situation and requesting their intervention at senior levels of the MFA. He followed up by meeting May 7 with representatives of several missions to identify the most effective way forward.
- Acting on a consensus reached at that meeting, Charge called on the Russian Ambassador in his capacity as dean of the diplomatic corps on May 10 to seek his intervention, which the Ambassador agreed to provide.
- The foreign business community) especially companies involved in the energy sector - has been apprised of the situation. The managing director of Shell in Syria agreed to raise the issue with the Oil Minister.
- Influential Syrian parents have been recruited to use their personal ties to senior SARG officials to resolve this problem.

To date, however, these efforts have been unsuccessful, and the receipt today of the diplomatic note escalating the matter to one of licensing DCS in order for it to continue functioning adds a worrisome dimension that further calls

into question the ability of the school to function.

14. (U) Text of diplomatic note follows:

May 08, 2006

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Syrian Arab Republic presents its compliments to the Embassy of the United States of America in Damascus and has the honor to refer to the Embassy,s Diplomatic Note No: 186 dated 03/22/2006, regarding granting residence permits to the teachers of the Damascus Community School.

The Ministry has the honor to relay the statement of the concerned authorities, which says that in order to comply with the Embassy,s request, the Embassy should, first, submit a request for license in accordance with the rules of the Legislative Decree No: 55/2004 and its executive instructions which organize the basics to establish the educational foundations related to embassies, since the mentioned School is not licensed until today.

Considering that the Ministry of Education in the Syrian Arab Republic has asked the school to provide the Ministry with the record of the students, especially the Syrian ones, and was not answered.

When the School is licensed accordingly, then the concerned authorities may consider to comply with its requests provided that these requests are attached with a C.V. for each applicant and residency permit according to the followed instructions with accurate specifications of their jobs whether they are students, teachers or administrators.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Syrian Arab Republic avails itself of this opportunity to express to the honorable Embassy its highest consideration and appreciation.

End Text.

15. (C) Comment. There seems to be little doubt that the SARG sees this issue as a way to further strike out at the USG in response to our efforts to impose diplomatic isolation on Damascus. We believe that the most effective way to approach this issue is to make it clear to the Syrian government that this is not/not a purely bilateral issue, and its clumsy attempt to create discomfort for the U.S. Embassy here will result in considerable pain to a large segment of the expatriate community. With this in mind, we will follow up with chiefs of mission and suggest that they ask their own foreign ministries to call in the Syrian Ambassador in their respective capitals to convey their deep concern over this measure, and, if appropriate, contact the Syrian MFA directly to forcefully and clearly deliver the same message. End Comment.

16. (C) We solicit the Department,s views regarding other possible courses of action that may not have occurred to us. At the moment, we are reluctant to ask you to call in the Syrian Ambassador, for fear that our evident discomfort with these developments will persuade him that pressure on DCS is an effective way to retaliate against USG policy. However, if the Department thinks otherwise, please advise. We need to employ every tool at our disposal to correct this situation as soon as possible, or face significant staffing issues at Embassy Damascus as the only suitable in-country educational option disappears.
SECHE